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Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity (including indigenous, minority and regional language names)

Cultural aspects of Māori geographic naming in New Zealand

Summary**

New Zealand geographic names indicate the cultural diversity of people past and present. They reflect the history of New Zealand and the different people who have lived there. Of these people, tangata whenua[1] Māori lived there for many centuries prior to European settlement and are responsible for many of the geographic names in New Zealand.

Geographic names are integral to the symbols representing what is on the ground. They give context to space, help us to navigate from one place to another, enable informative communication, link the stories behind them, provide identity and assert rights. Deeper still, they can revive or add to our knowledge of the heritage and events that occurred at a place. They are our foundation, our place in the world, our home. They give meaning, whether metaphorical, descriptive, themed, economic, personal or commemorative. The physical representation of "real world" geographic names on maps and charts is important as a fundamental cultural theme. Capturing all of these qualities in a single geographic name can be a challenge. A further challenge for New Zealand is that it has more than one official language.

Māori and English are official languages in New Zealand. Māori geographic names have been established since the time of the first migrations, between A.D. 800 and 950. Layers of history, settlement, conquest, integration and seasonal

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** The full report was prepared by Mark Dyer, Surveyor-General and Chairperson of the New Zealand Geographic Board Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa, and Wendy Shaw, Secretary for the New Zealand Geographic Board Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa, and will be available from http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/ungegnConf11.html, in the language of submission only, as document E/CONF.105/38/CRP.38.

[1] Tangata whenua refers to people who belong to or are from a particular place.

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migration would sometimes introduce multiple Māori names for features and places. This has posed challenges for what to show on modern maps, charts and other official documents, namely, whether to use the most commonly used toponym (Māori or non-Māori) or to restore an original Māori name. The desire to acknowledge, promote and encourage the use of existing Māori geographic names has been important since early exploration and is etched in our present-day geographic naming legislation. It is important to discover past names no longer in use as a way to recall history, heritage and cultural identity. For Māori geographic names the New Zealand Geographic Board has some specific statutory functions to provide for appropriate recognition to be given to the cultural and heritage values associated with geographic features:

(a) To collect them;

(b) To encourage their use on official maps and charts;

(c) To make sure that standardized orthography is applied;

(d) To ensure that Board membership has Māori representation.

The rules for geographic naming in New Zealand have evolved and developed over many years, with a strong emphasis on preserving and restoring original Māori names. Oral traditions and history remain strong in Māori culture today, with connections to the land and its names being hugely important to unlock past stories, events and mythologies, helping to preserve the creation traditions and providing a sense of belonging and identity. The written records introduced by early Europeans sometimes omitted Māori geographic names, but those names have remained known through oral traditions and continue to be used by Māori today. Since the 1970s there has been a steady move towards greater recognition of the significance of Māori geographic names in the history and culture of New Zealand. Milestones include the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975 and the Māori Language Act 1987 (revised in 2016). These led to a resurgence of interest in Māori geographic names, particularly through Treaty of Waitangi[2] settlements, which have included the restoration of original Māori geographic names as part of cultural redress.

[2] The agreement signed by representatives of the British Crown and leaders of most Māori tribes when New Zealand was first claimed as a colony in 1840 by the British.